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THE
STORY
of
FATHER NICHOLAS.

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FROM THE LOUNGER.
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THE STORY OF FATHER NICHOLAS.

It was at a small town in Britany, in which there was a convent of Benedictines, where particular circumstances had induced me to take up my residence for a few weeks. They had some pictures which strangers used to visit. I went with a party whose purpose was to look at them : mine in such places is rather to look at men. If in the world we behold the shifting scene which prompts observation, we see in such secluded societies a sort of still life, which nourishes thought, which gives subject for meditation. I confess, however, I have often been disappointed ; I have seen a group of faces under their cowls, on which speculation could build nothing ; mere common-place countenances, which might have equally belonged to a corporation of bakers or butchers. Most of those in the convent I now visited were of that kind : one however was of a very superior order ; that of a monk, who kneeled at a distance from the altar, near a Gothic window, through the painted panes of which a gleamy light touched his forehead, and threw a dark rembrandt shade on the hollow of a large, black, melancholy eye. It was impossible not to take notice of him. He looked up, involuntary no doubt, to a picture of our Saviour bearing his cross. The similarity of

the attitude, and the quiet resignation of the two countenances, formed a resemblance that could not but strike every one. 'It is Father Nicholas,' whispered our conductor, 'who is of all the brotherhood the most rigid to himself, and the kindest to other men. To the distressed, to the sick, and to the dying, he is always ready to administer assistance and consolation. Nobody ever told him a misfortune in which he did not take an interest, or request good offices which he refused to grant; yet the austerity and mortifications of his own life are beyond the strictest rules of his order; and it is only from what he does for others, that one supposes him to feel any touch of humanity.' The subject seemed to make our informer eloquent. I was young, curious, enthusiastic; it sunk into my heart, and I could not rest till I was made acquainted with Father Nicholas. Whether from the power of the introduction I procured, from his own benevolence, or from my deportment, the good man looked on me with the complacency of a parent. 'It is not usual,' said he, 'my son, for people at your age to solicit acquaintance like mine. To you the world is in its prime; why should you anticipate its decay? Gaiety and cheerfulness spring up around you; why should you seek out the abodes of melancholy and of woe? Yet though dead to the pleasures, I am not insensible to the charities of life. I feel your kindness, and wish for an opportunity to requite it.'—He perceived my turn for letters, and shewed me some curious manuscripts and some scarce books, which belonged to their convent: these were not the communications I sought; accident gave me an opportunity of obtaining the knowledge I valued more, the knowledge of Father Nicholas, the story of his sorrows, the cause of his austerities.

One evening, when I entered his cell, after knock-

ing at the door without being heard, I perceived him kneeling before a crucifix, to which was affixed a small picture, which I took to be that of the blessed virgin. I stood behind him, uncertain whether I should wait the close of his devotional exercise, or retire unperceived as I came. His face was covered with his hand; and I heard his stifled groans. A mixture of compassion and of curiosity fixed me to my place. He took his hands from his eyes with a quickened movement, as if a pang had forced them thence: He laid hold of the picture, which he kissed twice, pressed it to his bosom; and then, gazing on it earnestly, burst into tears. After a few moments, he clasped his hands together, threw a look up to heaven, and, muttering some words which I could not hear, drew a deep sigh, which seemed to close the account of his sorrows for the time, and rising from his knees, discovered me. I was ashamed of my situation, and stammered out some apology for my unintentional interruption of his devotions.—‘Alas! (said he) be not deceived; these are not the tears of devotion; not the melt-ings of piety, but the wringings of remorse. Perhaps, young man, it may stead thee to be told the story of my sufferings and of my sins: ingenuous as thy nature seems, it may be exposed to temptations like mine; it may be the victim of laudable feelings perverted, of virtue betrayed, of false honour, and mistaken shame.’

My name is *St. Hubert*; my family ancient and respectable, though its domains, from various untoward events, had been contracted much within their former extent. I lost my father before I knew the misfortune of losing him; and the indulgence of my mother, who continued a widow, made up, in the estimation of a young man, for any want of that protection or of guidance which another parent might have afforded. After having passed with



applause through the ordinary studies which the capital of our province allowed an opportunity of acquiring, my mother sent me to *Paris*, along with the son of a neighbouring family; who, though of less honourable descent, was much richer than ours. Young *Delaserre* (that was my companion's name) was intended for the army; me, from particular circumstances which promised success in that line, my mother and her friends had destined for the long robe, and had agreed for the purchase of a charge for me when I should be qualified for it. *Delaserre* had a sovereign contempt for any profession but that of arms, and took every opportunity of inspiring me with the same sentiments. In the capital I had this prejudice every day more and more confirmed. The *fieri* of every man who had served, the insolent superiority he claimed over his fellow-citizens, dazzled my ambition, and awed my bashfulness. From nature I had that extreme sensibility of shame, which could not stand against the ridicule even of much inferior men. Ignorance would often confound me in matters of which I was perfectly well informed, from his superior effrontery; and the best established principles of my mind would sometimes yield to the impudence of assuming sophistry, or of unblushing vice. To the profession which my relations had marked out for me, attention, diligence, and sober manners, were naturally attached; having once set down that profession as humiliating, I concluded its attendant qualities to be equally dishonourable. I was ashamed of virtues to which I was naturally inclined; a bully in vices which I hated and despised. *Delaserre* enjoyed my apostacy from innocence as a victory he had gained. At school he was much my inferior; and I attained every mark of distinction to which he had aspired in vain. In *Paris* he triumphed in his turn; his superior wealth enabled him to command the appearance of superior

dignity and shew; the cockade in his hat inspired a confidence which my situation did not allow; and, bold as he was in dissipation and debauchery, he led me as an inferior whom he had taught the art of living, whom he had first trained to independence and to manhood. My mother's ill-judged kindness supplied me with the means of those pleasures which my companions induced me to share, if pleasures they might be called, which I often partook with uneasiness, and reflected on with remorse. Sometimes, though but too seldom, I was as much a hypocrite on the other side; I was self-denied, beneficent, and virtuous by stealth; while the time and money which I had so employed, I boasted to my companions of having spent in debauchery, in riot, and in vice.

The habits of life, however, into which I had been led, began by degrees to blunt my natural feelings of rectitude, and to take from vice the restraints of conscience. But the dangerous connection I had formed, was broken off by the accident of Delaserre's receiving orders to join his regiment, then quartered at Dunkirk. At his desire, I gave him the convoy as far as to a relation's house in Picardy, where he was to spend a day or two in his way. 'I will introduce you,' said he in a tone of pleasantry, 'because you will be a favourite; my cousin *Santonges* is as sober and precise as you were when I first found you.' The good man whom he thus characterised, possessed indeed all those virtues of which the ridicule of Delaserre had sometimes made me ashamed, but which it had never made me entirely cease to revere. In his family I regained the station which, in our dissipated society at Paris, I had lost. His example encouraged and his precepts fortified my natural disposition to goodness; but his daughter, Emilia de Santonges, was a more interesting assistant to it. After my experi-

once of the few of her sex with whom we were acquainted in town, the native beauty, the unaffected manners of Emilia, were infinitely attractive. Delaserre, however, found them insipid and tiresome. He left his kinsman's the third morning after his arrival, promising, as soon as his regiment should be reviewed, to meet me in Paris. Except in Paris, said he, we exist merely, but do not live. I found it very different. I lived but in the presence of Emilia de Santonges. But why should I recall those days of purest felicity, or think of what my Emilia was? for not long after she was mine. In the winter they came to Paris, on account of her father's health, which was then rapidly on the decline. I tended him with that assiduity which was due to his friendship, which the company of Emilia made more an indulgence than a duty. Our cares, and the skill of his physicians, were fruitless. He died, and left his daughter to my friendship. It was then that I first dared to hope for her love; that over the grave of her father I mingled my tears with Emilia's, and tremblingly ventured to ask, if she thought me worthy of comforting her sorrows? Emilia was too innocent for disguise, too honest for affectation. She gave her hand to my virtues, (for I then was virtuous) to reward at the same time, and to confirm them. We retired to Santonges, where we enjoyed as much felicity as perhaps the lot of humanity will allow. My Emilia's merit was equal to her happiness; and I may say without vanity, since it is now my shame, that the since wretched St. Hubert was then thought to deserve the blessings he enjoyed.

In this state of peaceful felicity we had lived something more than a year, when my Emilia found herself with child. On that occasion, my anxiety was such as a husband, who doats upon his wife, may be supposed to feel. In consequence of that

anxiety, I proposed our removing for some weeks to Paris, where she might have abler assistance than our province could afford in those moments of danger which she soon expected. To this she objected with earnestness, from a variety of motives; but most of my neighbours applauded my resolution; and one, who was the nephew of a farmer-general, and had purchased the estate on which his father had been a tenant, told me, the danger from their country *accoucheurs* was such, that nobody who could afford to go to Paris would think of trusting them. I was a little tender on the reproach of poverty, and absolutely determined for the journey. To induce my wife's consent, I had another pretext, being left executor to a friend who had died in Paris, and had effects remaining there. Emilia at last consented; and we removed to town accordingly.

For some time I scarce ever left our hotel: it was the same at which Emilia and her father had lodged when he came to Paris to die, and leave her to my love. The recollection of those scenes, tender and interesting as they were, spread a sort of melancholy indulgence over our mutual society, by which the company of any third person could scarcely be brooked. My wife had some of those sad presages which women of her sensibility often feel in the condition she was then in. All my attention and solicitude were excited to combat her fears. 'I shall not live,' she would say, 'to revisit Santonges: but my Henry will think of me there: in those woods in which we have so often walked, by that brook to the fall of which we have listened together, and felt in silence what language, at least what mine, my Love, could not speak.'—The good Father was overpowered by the tenderness of the images that rushed upon his mind; and tears for a moment choked his utter-

ance. After a short space he began, with a voice faltering and weak.

—‘ Pardon the emotion that stopped my recital. You pity me ; but it is not always that my tears are of so gentle a kind ; the images her speech recalled softened my feelings into sorrow ; but I am not worthy of them.—Hear the confession of my remorse.

The anxiety of my Emilia was at last dissipated by her safe delivery of a boy ; and on this object of a new kind of tenderness we gazed with inexpressible delight. Emilia suckled the infant herself, as well from the idea of duty and of pleasure in tending it, as from the difficulty of finding in Paris a nurse to be trusted. We proposed returning to the country as soon as the re-establishment of her strength would permit : mean time, during her hours of rest, I generally went out to finish the business which the trust of my deceased friend had devolved upon me.

In passing through the Thuilleries, in one of those walks, I met my old companion Delaserie. He embraced me with a degree of warmth which I scarce expected from my knowledge of his disposition, or the length of time for which our correspondence had been broke off. He had heard, he said, accidentally of my being in town ; but had sought me for several days in vain. In truth, he was of all men one whom I was the most afraid of meeting. I had heard in the country of his unbounded dissipation and extravagance ; and there were some stories to his prejudice which were only not believed from an unwillingness to believe them in people whom the corruptions of the world had not familiarised to baseness ; yet I found he still possessed a kind of superiority over my mind which I was glad to excuse, by forcing myself to think him less unworthy than he was reported.

After a variety of enquiries, and expressing his cordial satisfaction at the present happiness I enjoyed, he pressed me to spend that evening with him so earnestly, that though I had made it a sort of rule to be at home, I was ashamed to offer an apology, and agreed to meet him at the hour he appointed.

Our company consisted only of Delaserre himself, and two other officers, one a good deal older than either of us, who had the cross of St. Louis, and the rank of colonel, whom I thought the most agreeable man I had ever met with. The unwillingness with which I had left home, and the expectation of a very different sort of party where I was going, made me feel the present one doubly pleasant. My spirits, which were rather low when I went in, from that constraint I was prepared for, rose in proportion to the pleasantries around me, and the perfect ease in which I found myself with this old officer, who had information, wit, sentiment, every thing I valued most, and every thing I least expected in a society selected by Delaserre. It was late before we parted; and at parting I received, not without pleasure, an invitation from the colonel to sup with him the evening after.

The company at his house I found enlivened by his sister, and a friend of her's, a widow, who, though not a perfect beauty, had a countenance that impressed one much more in her favour than mere beauty could. When silent, there was a certain softness in it infinitely bewitching; and when it was lightened up by the expression which her conversation gave, it was equally attractive. We happened to be placed next each other. Unused as I was to the little gallantries of fashionable life, I rather wished than hoped to make myself agreeable to her. She seemed, however, interested in my attentions and conversation; and in hers I

found myself flattered at the same time and delighted. We played, against the inclination of this lady and me; and we won rather more than I wished. Had I been as rich as Delaserre, I should have objected to the deepness of the stakes: but we were the only persons of the company that seemed uneasy at our success, and we parted with the most cordial good humour. *Madame de Trenville*, (that was the widow's name) smiling to the colonel, asked him to take his revenge at her house; and said, with an air of equal modesty and frankness, that as I had been the partner of her success, she hoped for the honour of my company, to take the chance of sharing a less favourable fortune.

At first my wife had expressed her satisfaction at my finding amusement in society, to relieve the duty of attending her. But when my absence grew very frequent, as indeed I was almost every day at *Madame de Trenville's*, though her words continued the same, she could not help expressing by her countenance her dissatisfaction at my absence. I perceived this at first with tenderness only, and next evening excused myself from keeping my engagement. But I found my wife's company not what it used to be: thoughtful, but afraid to trust one another with our thoughts, Emilia shewed her uneasiness in her looks; and I covered mine but ill with an assumed gaiety of appearance.

The day following Delaserre called, and saw Emilia for the first time. He rallied me gently for breaking my last night's appointment, and told me of another which he had made for me, which my wife insisted on my keeping. Her cousin applauded her conduct, and joked on the good government of wives. Before I went out in the evening, I came to wish Emilia good night. I thought I perceived a tear on her cheek, and would have staid, but

for the shame of not going. The company perceived my want of gaiety; and Delaserre was merry on the occasion. Even my friend the colonel threw in a little raillery on the subject of marriage. 'T was the first time I felt somewhat awkward at being the only married man of the party.

We played deeper and sat later than formerly; but I was to shew myself not afraid of my wife, and objected to neither. I lost considerably, and returned home mortified and chagrined. I saw Emilia next morning, whose spirits were not high. Methought her looks reproached my conduct; and I was enough in the wrong to be angry that they did so. Delaserre came to take me to his house to dinner. He observed as he went, that Emilia looked ill. 'Going to the country will re-establish her,' said I. 'Do you leave Paris?' said he.—'In a few days.'—'Had I such motives for remaining in it as you have.'—'What motives?'—'The attachment of such friends; but friendship is a cold word: the attachment of such a woman as de Trenville.' I know not how I looked; but he pressed the subject no further: perhaps I was less offended than I ought to have been.

We went to that lady's house after dinner. She was dressed most elegantly, and looked more beautiful than ever I had seen her. The party was more numerous than usual; and there was more vivacity in it. The conversation turned upon my intention of leaving Paris; the ridicule of country manners, of country opinions, of the insipidity of country enjoyments, was kept up with infinite spirit by Delaserre, and most of the younger members of the company. Madame de Trenville did not join in their mirth, and sometimes looked at me, as if the subject was too serious for her to be merry on. I was half ashamed and half sorry that I was going

to the country; less uneasy than vain at the preference that was shewn me.

I was a coward, however, in the wrong as well as in the right, and fell upon an expedient to screen myself from a discovery that might have saved me. I contrived to deceive my wife, and to conceal my visits to Madame de Trenville's, under the pretence of some perplexing incidents that had arisen in the management of those affairs with which I was intrusted. Her mind was too pure for suspicion or for jealousy. It was easy even for a novice in falsehood, like me, to deceive her. But I had an able assistant in Delaserre, who now resumed the ascendancy over me he had formerly possessed; but with an attraction more powerful, from the infatuated attachment which my vanity and weakness, as much as her art and beauty, had made me conceive for Madame de Trenville.

It happened, that just at this time a young man arrived from our province, and brought letters for Emilia from a female friend of hers in the neighbourhood of Santonges. He had been bred a miniature painter, and came to town for improvement in his art. Emilia, who doted on her little boy, proposed to him to draw his picture in the innocent attitude of his sleep. The young painter was pleased with the idea, provided she would allow him to paint the child in her arms. This was to be concealed from me, for the sake of surprising me with the picture when it should be finished. That she might have the better opportunity of effecting this little concealment, Emilia would often hear, with a sort of satisfaction, my engagements abroad, and encourage me to keep them, that the picture might advance in my absence.

She knew not what, during that absence, was my employment. The slave of vice and of profusion, I was violating my faith to her, in the arms of the

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most artful and worthless of women, and losing the fortune that should have supported my child and hers, to a set of cheats and villains. Such was the snare that Delasserre and his associates had drawn around me. It was covered with the appearance of love and generosity. De Trenville had art enough to make me believe, that she was every way the victim of her affection for me. My first great losses at play she pretended to reimburse from her own private fortune, and then threw herself upon my honour, for relief from those distresses into which I had brought her. After having exhausted all the money I possessed, and all my credit could command, I would have stopped short of ruin: but when I thought of returning in disgrace and poverty to the place I had left respected and happy, I had not resolution enough to retreat. I took refuge in desperation, mortgaged the remains of my estate, and staked the produce to recover what I had lost, or to lose myself. The event was such as might have been expected.

After the dizzy horror of my situation had left me power to think, I hurried to Madame de Trenville's. She gave me such a reception as suited one who was no longer worth the deceiving. Conviction of her falsehood, and of that ruin to which she had been employed to lead me, flashed upon my mind. I left her with execrations, which she received with the coolness of hardened vice, of experienced seduction. I rushed from her house, I knew not whither. My steps involuntary led me home. At my own door I stopped, as if it had been death to enter. When I had shrunk back some paces, I turned again; twice did I attempt to knock, and could not; my heart throbbed with unspeakable horror, and my knees smote each other. It was night; and the street was dark and silent around me. I threw myself down before the door, and wished some ruffian's hand to



ease me of life and thought together. At last the recollection of Emilia, and of my infant boy, crossed my disordered mind; and a gush of tenderness burst from my eyes. I rose, and knocked at the door. When I was let in, I went up softly to my wife's chamber. She was asleep, with a night lamp burning by her, her child sleeping on her bosom, and its little hand grasping her neck. Think what I felt as I looked! She smiled through her sleep, and seemed to dream of happiness. My brain began to madden again; and as the misery to which she must wake crossed my imagination, the horrible idea rose within me,—I shudder yet to tell it!—to murder them as they lay, and next myself!—I stretched my hand towards my wife's throat!—The infant unclasped its little fingers, and laid hold of one of mine. The gentle pressure wrung my heart; its softness returned; I burst into tears; but I could not stay to tell her of our ruin. I rushed out of the room; and gaining an obscure hotel in a distant part of the town, wrote a few distracted lines, acquainting her of my folly and of my crimes; that I meant immediately to leave France, and not return till my penitence should wipe out my offences, and my industry repair that ruin in which I had involved her. I recommended her and my child to my mother's care, and to the protection of that Heaven which she had never offended. Having sent this, I left Paris on the instant, and had walked several miles from town before it was light. At sun-rise a stage coach overtook me. 'T was going on the road to Brest. I entered it without arranging any future plan, and sat in sullen and gloomy silence, in the corner of the carriage. That day and next night I went on mechanically, with several other passengers, regardless of food, and incapable of rest. But the second day I found my strength fail; and when we stopped in the evening, I fell down in a faint in the passage of the inn. I was



put to bed, it seems, and lay for more than a week in the stupefaction of a low fever.

A charitable brother of that order to which I now belong, who happened to be in the inn, attended me with the greatest care and humanity; and when I began to recover, the good old man ministered to my soul, as he had done to my body, that assistance and consolation he easily discovered it to need. By his tender assiduities I was now so far recruited as to be able to breathe the fresh air at the window of a little parlour. As I sat there one morning, the same stage-coach in which I had arrived, stopped at the door of the inn, when I saw alight out of it the young painter who had been recommended to us at Paris. The sight overpowered my weakness, and I fell lifeless from my seat. The incident brought several people into the room, and among others the young man himself. When they had restored me to sense, I had recollection enough to desire him to remain with me alone. It was some time before he recognized me; when he did, with horror in his aspect, after much hesitation, and the most solemn intreaty from me, he told me the dreadful sequel of my misfortunes. My wife and child were no more. The shock which my letter gave, the state of weakness she was then in, had not strength to support. The effects were, a fever, delirium, and death. Her infant perished with her. In the interval of reason preceding her death, she called him to her bed-side; gave him the picture he had drawn; and with her last breath charged him, if ever he could find me out, to deliver that and her forgiveness to me. He put it into my hand. I know not how I survived. Perhaps it was owing to the outworn state in which my disease had left me. My heart was too weak to burst; and there was a sort of palsy on my mind that seemed insensible to its calamities. By that holy man who had once before saved me from death, I was placed here, where, ex-

cept one melancholy journey to that spot where they had laid my Emilia and her boy, I have ever since remained. My story is unknown; and they wonder at the severity of that life by which I endeavour to atone for my offences.—But it is not by suffering alone that Heaven is reconciled: I endeavour, by works of charity and beneficence, to make my being not hateful in his sight. Blessed be God! I have attained the consolation I wished.—Already, on my wasting days a beam of mercy sheds its celestial light. The visions of this flinty couch are changed to mildness. 'T was but last night my Emilia beckoned me in smiles; this little cherub was with her!'—His voice ceased,—he looked on the picture; then towards Heaven; and a faint glow crossed the paleness of his cheek. I stood awe-struck at the sight. The bell for vespers tolled—he took my hand—I kissed his; and my tears began to drop on it.—'My son,' said he, 'to feelings like yours it may not be unpleasing to recall my story:—If the world allure thee, if vice ensnare with its pleasures, or abash with its ridicule, think of Father Nicholas—be virtuous and be happy.'



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